The Battle of the Consumer in Postwar Britain*

Peter Gurney
University of Essex

> Perhaps the worst feature of the Co-operative Movement is that it has inspired a degree of loyalty in many of its active members which robs them almost completely of their sense of discrimination. The devoted co-operator will prefer to buy at his own shop even though a manifestly better buy is on offer in a free enterprise shop next door.[1]

> We had been passing through a period when rationing had been gradually and practically eliminated. . . . The shopper was no longer the pawn of the trader; the shopkeeper who showed willingness to cater for her rather than their own desires would win. This was to be the start of the consumer revolution.[2]

> The fight in the second century will be between the co-operatives and the combines.[3]

In his magisterial account of the history of European socialism, Donald Sassoon has argued that "the left-wing battles of the 1950s against the consumer society were as hopeless as those of the Luddites of yesteryear against machines"—an unfortunate but telling comparison.[4] The creation of a quantitatively and qualitatively different kind of economic, social, and political order may indeed have been inevitable at a time when developed capitalism entered a brief golden age, greater numbers of people enjoyed more disposable income, and the range of consumer goods on sale proliferated at a bewildering rate, but the precise nature of the so-called consumer society that eventually

* I should like to thank Stefan Schwarzkopf, Steve Smith, Iselin Theien, John Walton, and my anonymous reviewers for their encouragement and helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. I also benefited from presenting different versions to critical but sympathetic audiences at Churchill College, University of Cambridge, St. Hilda's College, University of Oxford, and the Amsab-Institute of Social History, Ghent.

[1] Conservative Political Centre, *Consumer Protection and Enlightenment* (London, 1960), 123.

[2] Jack Cohen, founder of Tesco, at a meeting of shareholders in July 1953, quoted by Maurice Corina in *Pile It High, Sell It Cheap* (London, 1971), 131.

[3] *Co-operative News,* April 1945, 16.

[4] Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism* (London, 1996), 196.

The Journal of Modern History 77 (December 2005): 956–987

emerged was emphatically not predetermined. To be sure, mass consumerism had a profound impact across the continent and has been rightly described by Hartmut Kaelble as "perhaps the major watershed in European social history between the middle and end of the twentieth century."[5] First in northern and central European countries such as Scandinavia, Britain, France, West Germany, Austria, and Italy, and later in southern or "peripheral" European states like Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Ireland, more and more workers were able to spend a higher proportion of their incomes on goods that had traditionally been regarded as luxuries, including radios and televisions, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, and, most important, motor cars. Only about 1 percent of the population of the United Kingdom owned a television in 1950, but by 1965 this figure had reached almost 25 percent. In West Germany the number grew from about 8 percent in 1960 to 20 percent five years later. Car ownership in France and West Germany stood at under 4 percent and just over 1 percent of the population, respectively, in 1950, but by 1965 the figures were almost 20 percent and 16 percent.[6] The effect of this great transformation was even more apparent in Italy, which had hitherto been a largely traditional country: the number of private cars rose there from 342,000 to 4.67 million between 1950 and 1964.[7] The good life for the majority was increasingly defined in terms of material acquisition, while the ability of Western capitalist economies to satisfy the expanding consumer desires of its citizens contrasted sharply with the continuing austerity suffered by those living under "actually existing socialist" regimes in Eastern Europe.[8]

However, pace Sassoon, just as the Luddites' critique was more than a protest against machinery, also raising vital questions about the genesis and development of industrial capitalism in the early nineteenth century, those on

[5] See Mary Fulbrook, ed., *Europe since 1945* (Oxford, 2001), 75.

[6] Goran Therborn, *European Modernity and Beyond: The Trajectory of European Societies, 1945–2000* (London, 1995), 142. Note also Stephen Marglin and Juliet Schor, eds., *The Golden Age of Capitalism* (Oxford, 1990); Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London, 1995), 257–86. Hobsbawm provides a personal account of this phase in his autobiography, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London, 2002), 222–24.

[7] Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943–1988* (London, 1990), 239. Ginsborg argues (240, 248) that mass consumption led, regrettably, to a more individualized and privatized society.

[8] Therborn, *European Modernity and Beyond,* 140–43; Ina Merkel, "Consumer Culture in the GDR," in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Centuries,* ed. Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judt (Cambridge, 1998), 281–99; Philipp Heldmann, "Negotiating Consumption in a Dictatorship: Consumer Politics in the GDR in the 1950s and 1960s," in *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America,* ed. Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton (Oxford, 2001), 185–202.

the left who questioned any simple celebration of "affluence" after World War II in Britain may have been motivated by more than the kind of atavistic Puritanism pointed to by various recent commentators. As studies by Tiratsoo, Fielding, and Black have thoroughly demonstrated, the Labour Party was seriously hamstrung in the postwar era by an ideological inheritance that tended to construe affluence and socialism as necessarily opposed to each other.[9] The evidence presented below lends support to this view to some extent, though I will argue that wider structural factors must also be given proper weight in any explanation of the failure of social democracy in Britain during the second half of the twentieth century. Of course, Labour fixer Herbert Morrison, who publicly boasted that he bought all his clothes from the local co-op store—"and my God, you look like it," a Cockney woman once jibed—was certainly a bit tight and rather a killjoy.[10] But there was more to Morrison's criticisms of the "affluent society" than that.

The Labour Member of Parliament (MP) Elaine Burton chose *The Battle of the Consumer* for the title of a pamphlet she published in 1954, and this phrase neatly captures one of the most important and underresearched themes of this key decade. For the 1950s witnessed a protracted struggle across the culture and polity over the body of the consumer—that is, over which groups most accurately represented the consumer and could therefore speak on their behalf. This article traces key moments of confrontation and suggests some of what was at stake in this battle. It focuses mainly on the cooperative movement, which represented the most important body of organized consumers at the time,[11] and it explores the movement's reactions to and contests with the "re-

[9] Nick Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction, Affluence, and Labour Politics: Coventry, 1945–60* (London, 1990), and "Popular Politics, Affluence, and the Labour Party in the 1950s," in *Contemporary British History, 1931–1961,* ed. A. Gorst, L. Johnman, and W. Scott Lucas (London, 1991), 44–61; Steven Fielding, "Activists against 'Affluence': Labour Party Culture during the 'Golden Age,' circa 1950–1970," *Journal of British Studies* 40 (2001): 241–67; Lawrence Black, *The Political Culture of the Left in Affluent Britain, 1951–64* (London, 2003). Note also Vernon Bogdanor and Robert Skidelsky, eds., *The Age of Affluence, 1951–1964* (London, 1970); Martin Francis, "Economics and Ethics: The Nature of Labour's Socialism, 1945–51," *Twentieth Century British History* 6 (1995): 220–43.

[10] Bernard Donoughue and G. W. Jones, *Herbert Morrison: A Portrait of a Politician* (London, 1973), 20.

[11] The cooperative movement comprised some of the most important working-class associations in Britain since the Victorian period. The basic building block was the retail store, owned and run democratically by members of local societies. Profits from trade were divided between members according to the value of goods purchased during a quarter, membership was conferred by ownership of a £1 share that could be bought with accumulated dividends. Most societies were affiliated with and also elected the leadership of two central, federal organizations: the Co-operative Union, which gave legal advice and promoted cooperative education, and the English or Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Societies (CWS), which practiced bulk buying and produced a

gime of mass consumption" that was being generated during the postwar period.[12] First, this study will critically assess the position of the movement by the early 1950s, underlining both its continuing significance and its contradictory attitude toward new forms and patterns of consumption. It will then consider the series of crises that affected the movement over the course of that decade and will argue that we ought to situate the organized consumer squarely within what was often a very hostile economic and political context. As Birmingham cooperator Fred Longden argued in 1941, "the proper study of Cooperation is capitalism."[13] Finally, it will examine the embrace of the individual consumer that came increasingly to mark the thinking and policy of both major political parties during the 1950s; this undoubtedly helped undermine the cooperative alternative to mass consumption. This study suggests that during that decade the atomized figure of the individual consumer began to exert a hegemonic influence across both polity and civil society, shaping the epistemologies and languages through which the political and economic domains were thought and represented, and that Labour was as deeply affected by this profound shift as the Conservatives.[14] Against the grain of some recent work in this developing field, this study demonstrates that, far from seeing the emergence of a consumer movement in any meaningful sense, this period instead witnessed the effective marginalization of the one significant consumer movement Britain ever had.[15]

---

wide range of goods. The stated ambition of the movement before World War I was to promote a "Co-operative Commonwealth" where workers would own and control "the entire producing, banking, shipping, and every other interest in the country," as J. T. W. Mitchell, Chairman of the English CWS, stated in 1887. See Peter Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870–1930* (Manchester, 1996), 18–20, 44. Some revisionist accounts of the Attlee government, which foreground working-class indifference to Labour Party policy and the welfare state, underestimate the importance of consumer issues and the ability of working people to organize around consumption and to articulate an alternative vision of how the market should be regulated. See in particular Steven Fielding, Peter Thompson, and Nick Tiratsoo, *England Arise! The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester, 1995), which employs a very restrictive conception of politics. Unfortunately, the most interesting, well-researched study of the politics of consumption in the postwar period curiously ignores the movement. See Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939–1955* (Oxford, 2000).

[12] Victoria de Grazia, "Changing Consumption Regimes in Europe, 1930–1970," in *Getting and Spending,* ed. Strasser et al., 59–83.

[13] Fred Longden, *Co-operative Politics inside Capitalist Society* (Birmingham, 1941), 235.

[14] For the concept of domain, see Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830–1864* (Chicago, 1995), 5–8.

[15] Matthew Hilton, "The Fable of the Sheep, or, Private Virtues, Public Vices: The Consumer Revolution of the Twentieth Century," *Past and Present* 171 (2002): 222–61, and *Consumerism in Twentieth Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Move-*

I. The Position of the Organized Consumer

At the end of World War II, the members of the British cooperative movement were in a buoyant mood. They had worked closely with the government during wartime, and the movement's contribution to the home front was widely recognized.[16] On paper and on the ground it looked very impressive indeed. In 1946 the movement could claim more than 9.7 million members and over a thousand retail societies. The annual trade of these societies stood at over £402 million, while the annual trade of the English and Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Societies (CWS and SCWS) amounted to £249 million. Most important, the movement continued to expand in the immediate postwar period. By 1958 membership had reached 12.5 million, though the number of societies had shrunk by about a hundred. The annual trade of retail societies was now nearly £998 million, while the annual trade of the CWS and SCWS was well over £550 million. The movement owned and controlled major factories, flour mills, and farms, both in the United Kingdom and abroad. Thousands of management, educational, and social meetings were held every day; there were cooperative sporting events, musical festivals, and theater groups. By the early 1950s at least one-third of the entire adult population was connected with this movement in one way or another.[17] Ideologically, cooperators had developed, from the early nineteenth century onward, a democratic, ethical model of consumption—a "moral economy of co-operation"—that depended on an associated, active membership rather than the gullible mass consumers preferred by capitalist manufacturers and advertisers. Many activists looked forward to the creation of a "Co-operative Commonwealth," in which social production as well as distribution would be entirely owned and controlled by the people. As an official statement of policy published in 1950 explained: "Profit is abolished by the simple fact of Co-operation, which has thus substituted a different motive in place of profit seeking which is the mainspring of economic life outside the co-operative sphere. . . . In place of individualism, Co-operation has regard for public well-being and there is constant endeavour to train and influence human instincts in order to make co-operation between people an objective and an ideal." Noting that £38,000,000 in dividends was distributed

ment (Cambridge, 2003). As the latter is mainly a history of the Consumers' Association—discussed in more detail below—Hilton's search is ultimately unsuccessful.

[16] Arnold Bonner, *British Co-operation: The History, Principles, and Organisation of the British Co-operative Movement* (Manchester, 1961), 209–29; Johnston Birchall, *Co-op: The People's Business* (Manchester, 1994), 136–42.

[17] G. D. H. Cole, *The British Co-operative Movement in a Socialist Society* (1951), 13–14; Bonner, *British Co-operation,* 251, 253, 259; Birchall, *Co-op,*142–46. The roots of all this are discussed in my monograph, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870–1930* (Manchester, 1996).

every year to members of local societies, the authors went on to stress the economic and moral challenge the movement represented to both large-scale capitalist enterprise, which existed to enrich shareholders, and small shopkeepers, who cared primarily for their own selfish interests.[18]

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the growth of consumer cooperative societies, the dominant form in Britain, had been confined largely to the major industrial regions—Lancashire, the West Riding of Yorkshire, Tyneside and the East Midlands, and the Scottish Lowlands around Glasgow. The social geography of cooperation was transformed in the interwar period, as the movement began to expand into what had previously been described as "co-operative deserts"—particularly London and the South East, which weathered the depression years better than most other regions.[19] This trend continued in the aftermath of World War II, now fostered as well by an increase in the earning and buying power of workers that drew much comment from observers by the early 1950s. G. D. H. Cole, for example, noted how "consumers' expenditure has been shifting steadily as living standards have risen and new wants have emerged. Many of the things on which consumers are spending more and more of their incomes fall wholly or mainly outside the range of present Co-operative services."[20] The mainstay of cooperative trade remained what it had always been—foodstuffs—and the movement was falling behind in the sale of what was known as "dry goods"—clothes, household furnishings, and appliances, all symbolically charged commodities of an emerging affluent society.

The movement's response to retailing modernity was highly ambivalent, and this made it difficult for it to compete effectively in new markets. Admittedly, some societies took part enthusiastically in the second "retailing revolution" that transformed the British high street after the war.[21] The London Cooperative Society, for example, opened the first self-service store in the country in 1942, and by the end of the decade fifty retail societies operated on that system in one hundred shops. Competition from the multiples (chain stores)

[18] *The Co-operative Movement in a Collectivist Economy* (Manchester, 1950), 5–6.

[19] See J. A. Hough, *Co-operative Retailing, 1914–1945: A Statistical Analysis of the Development of Retailing in the British Co-op Movement* (London, 1949); Martin Purvis, "Crossing Urban Deserts: Consumers, Competitors, and the Protracted Birth of Metropolitan Co-operative Retailing," *International Review of Retail, Distribution, and Consumer Research* 9 (1999): 225–43.

[20] Cole, *The British Co-operative Movement,* 41–42. Note also J. B. Jefferys, *Retail Trading in Britain, 1850–1950* (Cambridge, 1954).

[21] Ellis Somake and Rolf Hellberg, *Shops and Stores Today: Their Design, Planning, and Organisation* (London, 1956); Peter Mathias, *Retailing Revolution: A History of Multiple Retailing in the Food Trades Based upon the Allied Suppliers Group of Companies* (London, 1967); Dorothy Davis, *A History of Shopping* (London, 1966); Rachel Bowlby, *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping* (London, 2000).

and independents increased thereafter, but even in the mid-fifties cooperators still led the field, operating more than 60 percent of self-service outlets.[22] Despite such optimistic signs, the dominant trend was far more ominous: many cooperators had difficulty handling affluence, constrained as they were by an ideology that privileged an ethical understanding of consumption and often condemned the more hedonistic, sexualized approach to buying and selling that scholars have come to regard as a hallmark of capitalist modernity.[23] This disabling weakness particularly affected the ability of the movement to appeal to young, especially female, consumers. Many examples could be given here. Dior's "New Look," for instance, which appeared early in 1947, provoked a torrent of criticism within the movement. A delegate at a Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG) conference "objected to tight lacing and long skirts" and hoped that the CWS would not waste time, material, and labor in producing the styles of the New Look. The speaker had to admit reluctantly, however, that "young girls wanted classy shoes, and, in dresses, they would rather have a good design than quality. There was a great demand for appearance."[24] The New Look, criticized predictably on grounds of waste and frivolity, signified for women like historian Carolyn Steedman's mother (who would not have been caught dead in a co-op store) the possibility of not only a new body image but also a new way of life, a better, more exciting future.[25]

The business and educational sides of the movement were structurally divided, and while leaders of the latter often fulminated against an encroaching "consumer culture," the former tried hard to adjust pragmatically to the new trading situation.[26] The CWS, which owned large clothing, footwear, and fur-

[22] *Co-operative News,* August 27, 1955, 1.

[23] Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, eds., *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley, 1996).

[24] *Co-operative News,* March 6, 1948, 12. For the continuing debate, see August 14, 1948, 8; September 11, 1948, 12; January 22, 1955, 10. The revolution in menswear was also ignored by the co-op, despite the obvious success of companies like Burton's and Alexander's. Arthur Seaton's wardrobe in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* was not crammed with CWS suits but with "quality tailor-mades, a couple of hundred quids' worth." See Frank Mort and Peter Thompson, "Retailing, Commercial Culture, and Masculinity in 1950s Britain: The Case of Montague Burton, the 'Tailor of Taste,'" *History Workshop Journal* 38 (1994): 106–27; Alan Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (London, 1958; 1979 ed.), 169.

[25] Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London, 1986), 121. An alternative perspective on desire and working-class culture in the postwar period is provided by Tim Lott in his moving autobiography, *The Scent of Dried Roses* (London, 1996). On reactions to the New Look more generally, see Pearson Phillips, "The New Look," in *The Age of Austerity, 1945–1951,* ed. Michael Sissons and Phillip French (London, 1963), 132–54; Harry Hopkins, *The New Look: A Social History of the Forties and Fifties* (London, 1964), 95–104; Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London, 1985), 225–26.

[26] Cole, *The British Co-operative Movement,* 36, 46–47.

niture factories, frequently redesigned its products to take account of the increasing demand for modern design and style. Advertisements for CWS "utility" corsets at the end of the war, for example, stressed that they were made to "pre-war standard," "designed for full figures," "plain but very strong." Three years later, despite moralistic attacks by the guild, the range had been completely redesigned. Advertisements now remarked on how light and natural the new garments were. Not only did they hold everything in place, they also correctly remodeled the wearer: "New Look or slacks and blouse, you will look your charming self only if the 'underneaths' are right. . . . Desbeau, you remember, are the corsets and brassieres that shape well."[27] Many activists, however, continued to insist that what was needed was an education in the principles of cooperation that would dispel the illusory attractions of fashion. This division between the economy and culture of cooperation was to prove disastrous and partly explains the movement's inability to recruit a new generation of young female consumers. Symptomatic here was the inexorable decline of both the WCG and the cooperative youth movement. The guild's membership fell from a prewar peak of over 87,000 to under 59,000 in 1953, and the collapse of youth groups was even more calamitous, from 40,000 members in 1945 to 22,000 ten years later.[28]

Despite these material and ideological difficulties, the movement hoped to benefit directly with Labour in power after 1945. The Co-operative Party, which had represented the organized consumer in Parliament since its foundation at the end of the First World War, won twenty-three seats in the General Election that year.[29] A formal alliance with Labour went back to the late 1920s, but it was now widely believed by many cooperators that the need for coordinated political policy and action was more imperative than ever, given increased capitalist pressure on the consumer.[30] For its part, Labour depended on the movement, to a considerable extent, to make its policy of austerity acceptable to working-class consumers.[31] Thus the cooperative press supported

[27] *Co-operative News,* May 6, 1945; November 13, 1948.

[28] Ibid., June 23, 1956, 8–9; Gillian Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women: The Women's Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (London, 1998), xii. Postwar youth also posed insuperable problems for the Labour Party, as Steven Fielding notes in his article, "Activists against 'Affluence,'" 262–64.

[29] For the early history of this development, see Sidney Pollard, "The Foundation of the Co-operative Party," in *Essays in Labour History, 1886–1923,* ed. Asa Briggs and John Saville (London, 1971), 185–210; Tony Adams, "The Formation of the Co-operative Party Reconsidered," *International Review of Social History* 32 (1987): 48–68.

[30] G. W. Rhodes, *Co-operative-Labour Relations. 1900–1962* (Loughborough, 1962), 71–75; T. F. Carbery, *Consumers in Politics: A History and General Review of the Co-operative Party* (Manchester, 1969).

[31] G. D. N. Worswick, "Economic Policy and the Co-operative Movement," in *The Co-operative Movement in Labour Britain,* ed. Noah Barou (London, 1948), 14–29.

extensive rationing, even of bread, in order to ensure that the burden of reconstruction was shared across classes; otherwise, "some people will be getting luxuries before others have had their essential needs met."[32] The WCG repudiated claims by the Housewives' League and the Conservative Party that Britain was starving and placed on record at its annual congress in 1947 the appreciation of 62,000 Guildswomen for the government's efforts to maintain price controls and rationing in the context of world food shortages. Despite grumblings at both the local and national levels, the editor of the *Co-operative News* also continued to back the Minister of Food, John Strachey, and remained sanguine about the morale of the majority: "The British people, although weary of restrictions and queues, are still prepared to accept rationing schemes that provide fair shares for all."[33] The first real indication that people's patience had been stretched to the limit was provided by the municipal elections in November 1947, when Labour lost 652 seats, nearly half the gains made two years earlier. And although the moral and utilitarian priorities of the movement dovetailed well with the program of the Attlee government, splits soon emerged between them.[34] Cooperators, for example, criticized the operation of rationing schemes, particularly of bread, maintaining that they had been unfairly treated.[35] Friction was also caused by increases in the purchase tax and by the allocation of shop sites on new housing estates, which spatially transformed working-class communities.[36] Moreover, cooperators were excluded from the Economic Planning Board, and although some had mixed feelings

[32] *Co-operative News,* July 14, 1945, 8; July 21, 1945, 8; June 22, 1946, 8; July 6, 1946, 8. Bread rationing was introduced in an effort to strengthen Anglo-U.S. relations, as Zweiniger-Bargielowska demonstrates in "Bread Rationing in Britain, July 1946–July 1948," *Twentieth Century British History* 4 (1993): 57–85.

[33] *Co-operative News,* June 28, 1947, 14; November 15, 1947, 8.

[34] Ibid., November 8, 1947, 8. Zweiniger-Bargielowska has argued that rationing was a major vote loser for Labour, especially among women, a claim disputed by Hinton, who maintains that working-class women became more favorable toward Labour between 1945 and 1951. See Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, "Rationing, Austerity, and the Conservative Party Recovery after 1945," *Historical Journal* 37 (1994): 173–97; James Hinton, "Militant Housewives: The British Housewives' League and the Attlee Government," *History Workshop Journal* 38 (1994): 128–56. Not surprisingly, evidence from the cooperative movement tends to support Hinton.

[35] They understandably complained, for instance, that the allocation of rationed goods took no account of the significant increase in membership since the war. See *Co-operative News,* December 28, 1946, 1, 8; May 10, 1947, 8. Strachey proved evasive on the issue.

[36] Ibid., November 22, 1947, 1, 8; November 29, 1947, 3; January 17, 1948, 2, 8; June 4, 1949, 1; November 19, 1949, 5; November 11, 1950, 1. On the importance of co-op stores for the creation of working-class neighborhoods in an earlier period, see Mike Savage, *The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics: The Labour Movement in Preston, 1880–1940* (Cambridge, 1987), 127–29.

about joining "a national body formed by capitalist enterprise," cooperators were deeply concerned that "the organised consumers of this country have no voice in the planning of our economic affairs."[37]

The refusal to take cooperative ideology and ambition seriously is well illustrated by a debate in the *New Statesman.* As we have seen, Labour was keen to use the cooperative movement when it suited but insisted on the primacy of its own project: "In politics, most active Co-operators are 'Labour' first and foremost, and Co-operators a long way second," asserted the author of a highly condescending report on the annual Co-operative Congress of 1949. Recent attempts by the movement to block various policy initiatives (on insurance and state trading, for instance) meant that it could easily become "a bulwark both of large-scale capitalism and the small trader." Cooperators were criticized for their timidity, lack of "enterprise," and inability to attract "high-class men."[38] The Secretary of the Co-operative Party, Jack Bailey, pointed out in his response that the author of this typically dismissive article regarded the movement "as if it were merely an institution" and that he overlooked "its primary purpose as an expression of significant social principle." In his view, the author tended, "like so many modern exponents of Socialist theory, . . . to think of Socialism only as a legislative process." Bailey's most telling point was that many detractors of cooperation in the Labour camp, who invariably based their criticisms on narrow economic criteria, had internalized both the logic and the language of their political opponents: "Some of us," Bailey remarked, "are audacious enough to distrust the assessment of the value of social movements solely by economic criteria."[39] Kingsley Martin, editor of the *New Statesman,* later tried to patch things up, admitting that the failure to consult cooperators over plans to nationalize insurance had been a mistake. But the effort was half-hearted—cooperators were advised to "rise above the parochial preoccupations of their everyday work"—and it was unlikely that anyone was convinced by attempts to bridge the widening gulf between nationalization and other forms of social ownership on a purely linguistic level with calls for a "Co-operative Socialist Commonwealth."[40]

The most fundamental disagreement was over forms of public ownership. Labour plans to nationalize industrial insurance had brought things to a head, and although mutualization was eventually agreed to as a compromise, the damage was done. Cooperative leaders worried that their own distinctive form

[37] The Economic Planning Board was recruited from the Federation of British Industry, the British Employers' Confederation, and the Trades Union Congress. The remarks are J. W. Blower's, Chairman of the Co-operative Union, who put the case to Attlee. See *Co-operative News,* December 6, 1947, 1; December 20, 1947, 8.

[38] *New Statesman and Nation,* May 14, 1949, 492–93.

[39] Ibid., May 28, 1949, 558. Note also Jack Bailey, *The British Co-operative Movement* (London, 1955), 169–71.

[40] *New Statesman and Nation,* April 8, 1950, 392–93.

of economic organization would be snuffed out because of Labour's preference for bureaucratic and statist alternatives.[41] Many cooperators were highly critical of the undemocratic and ineffective consumer councils attached to nationalized industries, and they agreed with Walsall cooperator Fred Abbotts that "the multiplication of state boards would lead to a totalitarian and not a socialist State."[42] It seems unlikely that this controversy would have helped Labour at the General Election in February 1950. The electoral gains achieved five years before were almost completely wiped out (the number of Co-operative Party MPs fell to seventeen), and this lent a new urgency to debates over public ownership and Labour strategy. Evidence suggests that the Labour Party made some effort to appease the consumer interest following its setback at the polls. *Labour and the New Society* advocated a consumers' charter that would guarantee the maintenance of price controls and food subsidies, recommended the establishment of consumer advice centers, and demanded legislative action against manufacturers that boycotted price-cutting retailers: "the socialist aim must be to supplement the democracy of workers with a democracy of consumers." Even a die-hard statist like Morrison had to admit that "nationalization is only one of several possible ways of working together," and he promised to deliver the charter before the next election.[43]

In the main, cooperators were unmoved by such reassurances and continued to be acutely disappointed. Perhaps one of the most forthright denunciations of the policy of the Attlee government was made by Donald Dow, a director of the SCWS, at a conference at Galashields in February 1951. In a combative address Dow expressed his amazement at the docility with which the movement had accepted a subordinate role in postwar Britain:

> We are today witnessing the spectacle of a political party in power and owing its position of power very largely to the efforts and influence of co-operators over the last fifty years, but too often minimising the debt, except on the odd occasion when a Cabinet Minister makes some flattering reference to the movement, or when a few isolated posts in nationalised industries are allocated to co-operators as individuals, or the odd page or two in the Labour Party manifesto is devoted to the movement. Having to a large extent created the present Government, the co-operative movement is being led, by deference to the Government, to soft pedal on some of its principles and allow itself to be pushed into a back seat—a situation which the most intense efforts of capitalist monopolists and enemies of co-operation could not accomplish in days gone by.[44]

[41] *Co-operative News,* October 22, 1949, 7; November 5, 1949, 7. There is a useful discussion of this issue in Martin Francis, *Ideas and Politics under Labour, 1945–51* (Manchester, 1997), 85–89.

[42] *Co-operative News,* October 22, 1949, 7; November 5, 1949, 7.

[43] Ibid., May 6, 1950, 1; August 26, 1950, 1–2.

[44] Ibid., March 3, 1951, 1.

It was reported at the Co-operative Congress in 1951 that repeated attempts to heal divisions between the cooperative movement and the Labour Party had failed, and relations remained extremely volatile up until the General Election in October. After Labour's narrow defeat at the polls the editor of the *News* called for a complete rethinking of nationalization, an undemocratic policy which, he concluded, had bred disillusionment and apathy among working-class consumers.[45]

II. Moments of Crisis

With Labour out of office and relations between the cooperative movement and the Labour Party strained to the limit, cooperators had to face alone the challenges posed by the spread of consumer capitalism. Of most concern to cooperators was the growth of monopolies and trade associations within the sphere of consumption. The critique of monopoly within the movement can be traced back to the 1890s, but fears were considerably heightened toward the end of World War II: "Are we to have Government controls, or are we to have our economic life controlled by private monopolies, combines, cartels, and trade associations?" asked an editorial in the *News.*[46] By this time there were more than 2,500 trade associations in Britain, and these had been used by manufacturers to shut cooperators out of important new markets for decades. A. V. Alexander put the movement's case most forcefully, maintaining that the institution was, in fact, "the people's main defence against monopoly . . . the only real challenge to the giant trusts." He went on to list some key antagonists: "For soap, it is the only effective competitor of the Unilever combine; Co-op tobacco and cigarettes are almost the sole challenge to the Imperial Tobacco Co.; Co-op milling is the single alternative to the Rank and Spiller combines."[47]

A critical stage in the contest was reached by the early fifties owing to "the unabated war" between rival producers in the soap trade, characterized by massive advertising campaigns and aggressive marketing strategies.[48] The CWS soap factories tried hard to compete with private manufacturers, which were tempting retail societies to purchase their products with offers of generous

[45] Ibid., April 7, 1951, 3; November 3, 1951, 2, 16. Robert Millward and John Singleton, *The Political Economy of Nationalisation in Britain, 1920–1950* (Cambridge, 1995), provides the wider context.

[46] *Co-operative News,* March 31, 1945, 8.

[47] Ibid., June 16, 1945, 1. See also April 28, 1945, 8; May 12, 1945, 8. For the growth of monopolies, Leslie Hannah's *The Rise of the Corporate Economy* (London, 1983) remains fundamental.

[48] *Co-operative News,* January 26, 1952, 4.

discounts, but they were at a serious disadvantage. For one thing, the movement lacked technological expertise and the necessary plant to produce the new synthetic detergents pushed by competitors like Unilever. Moreover, cooperative brands were only sold in one shop out of every fifteen and it therefore proved very difficult to maintain, let alone increase, their existing market share of less than 20 percent. Despite such problems, the movement had no choice but to engage in the struggle and consequently secured supplies from private manufacturers.[49] The CWS pinned its hopes on Spel, a new washing powder launched in the summer of 1952. From the outset, capitalist manufacturers were portrayed as the enemy of the movement as well as of working-class consumers more generally. The contest was described in almost apocalyptic terms by local and national leaders: "What would any of the private makers give to have 'Spel' out of the way? That is a result for which they would be prepared to pay a big price, and the temptation to get it at almost any cost is the element in this modern detergent war which should put every single cooperator in Great Britain on his toes. . . . This battle is too big to lose," warned an editorial in the *News.*[50] "If we fail here it is going to be a tragedy for us all," declared Robert Deans at a meeting of CWS directors at Leicester.[51] It soon became apparent that the odds were stacked against the CWS, and although activists made determined efforts to educate members about "the gigantic financial and industrial organisations which work behind the simple product names which have been given to the competitive powders," recalcitrant shoppers continued to demand brands such as Persil at the stores. Sales of Spel plummeted.[52]

After rationing finally ended in 1954, a "margarine war" commenced that also seriously threatened cooperative sales. More branded products reappeared in the shops, and the CWS responded with Red Seal and Silver Seal. Heightened competition in these specific markets served to intensify pressure within the movement to increase expenditures on advertising. Consequently, over £15,000 was spent promoting Spel the year it was introduced. This was a paltry sum, however, compared to the enormous costs incurred by private enterprise; well over £320,000 was spent advertising Persil over the same period.[53] The CWS even sponsored a quiz show in the autumn of 1954 on the commercial

[49] Ibid., February 16, 1952, 2.
[50] Ibid., December 27, 1952, 2.
[51] Ibid., July 25, 1953, 2.
[52] Ibid., September 5, 1953, 2. Private manufacturers began to advertise through schools at this time, promising donations to charity in exchange for soap and detergent packet tops. Cooperators protested (to no avail) to the Minister of Education; see November 13, 1954, 5. An earlier soap war is discussed in my *Co-operative culture,* 204–7.
[53] *Co-operative News,* September 5, 1953, 2, 10.

station Radio Luxembourg that was intended to boost margarine sales and was aimed specifically at "the younger engaged or married couples whose tastes and buying habits are just being formed." The following year the CWS also bought airtime on commercial television.[54] Many cooperators may have agreed with Aneurin Bevan's description of the advertising industry as "one of the evil consequences of a society which is itself evil," but the movement had little choice but to take up the weapons of its adversaries. Overall, however, cooperative advertising remained small scale, as the movement still spent less than £1 million annually, compared to the £200 million expended by capitalist companies.[55] Such initiatives did little to remedy the stagnation of cooperative trade, particularly in dry goods. Cooperators tended to collapse together the threat posed by monopolies with the rapid expansion of chain stores, particularly Marks and Spencer, a company that managed to project both a classless and a moralized vision of consumer modernity in which quality, style, and value were for the first time within reach of the majority of shoppers.[56]

Apart from these major structural constraints, the controversial introduction of commercial television was also experienced by the movement as a dangerous challenge. Mrs. Hall, president of the WCG, attacked commercial television at a rally in Coventry because she believed television advertisements would be costly and "distasteful" and would work against the cooperative project. C. A. Sheridan gloomily prophesied in the *News* that "the great monopolies" would use television to inflict serious damage on the movement.[57] When the Government White Paper in support of commercial television was debated in the House of Commons in December 1953, the atmosphere was heated. Herbert Morrison put the opposition case in a memorable speech that underlined that this was "perhaps one of the most important, if not the most important, debates that we have had since the war."[58] The role and significance of advertising lay at the heart of the matter. Morrison's line, which was also that of the cooperative movement, was that advertising costs would fall disproportionately on the consumer: "The consumer will pay. It will be part of the cost of running industry, part of the cost of production. Anyone can read

[54] Ibid., May 15, 1954, 1; October 9, 1954, 9; September 17, 1955, 1.

[55] Ibid., June 20, 1953, 2.

[56] Marks and Spencer increased its annual turnover from just over £34 million in 1948 to well over £130 million in 1958, without massive advertising. Goronwy Rees, *St. Michael: A History of Marks and Spencer* (London, 1969), 142–45, 180–94; Asa Briggs, *Marks and Spencer, 1884–1984* (London, 1984), 55, 78; Harry Hopkins, *The New Look,* 314–15. For the movement's fears, *Co-operative News,* July 16, 1955, 2.

[57] Ibid., June 27, 1953, 8; July 3, 1954, 2.

[58] *Parliamentary Debates,* 5th ser., vol. 522, col. 65. Morrison unfortunately failed to discuss the subject in his lackluster memoir, *Herbert Morrison: An Autobiography* (London, 1960).

the reports of the American organisation, Consumers' Union, which reported in respect of certain tomato soups that some sample tasters who tasted without knowing which brand they were tasting, gave the highest marks to the least advertised tomato soup. This business boils down in the end—which is perhaps relevant to tomato soup—that it can be the case that the highest-priced article is highest-priced because it is highly advertised, yet it may be the worst of the lot. . . . Advertising has to be paid for . . . by the consumer or the worker employed in the industry."[59] Morrison also maintained that commercial television would simultaneously encourage what he called "the big man in industry," as advertising costs could not be met by small manufacturers: "It will build up the rich monopolies. . . . This is a proposal in the direction of monopoly in private industry." Recognizing that there were deep divisions in the Conservative Party, Morrison argued that the Whips should be removed and a compromise solution sought over what was clearly "a great moral issue."[60]

The leader of the co-op group in the Commons, George Darling, developed the cooperative position in more detail and supported the argument about monopoly and access; few if any trade unions, cooperative societies, or private firms would be able to afford to go into television transmission and pay for programs and advertisements if the proposed legislation became law. Again, the morality of advertising was a key issue: "There is one advertising agency . . . J. Walter Thompson. One of its biggest clients, both in the United States and here, is a well known firm which manufactures detergents and soap powders. Hon. Members may think this is a small point but it indicates the dangers and difficulties we are up against. In the United States of America this agency and the manufacturers of these soap powders have been asked by the Federal Communications Commission to stop making false claims for the products. Over here the false claims are still being made. . . . Who will control the advertisers?"[61] Concerns regarding "Americanization" were widely shared, but though American advertising agencies were becoming more prominent in Britain at this time, in practice they had to adapt their style to domestic tastes and cultural traditions, which often meant addressing consumers in more sophisticated ways.[62] Darling also referred in his speech to the collective boycott of the movement by radio and television manufacturers, which undermined the

[59] *Parliamentary Debates,* 5th ser., vol. 522, cols. 77–78.

[60] Ibid., 87.

[61] Ibid., 135–36.

[62] Douglas West, "Multinational Competition in the British Advertising Agency Business, 1936–1987," *Business History Review* 62 (1988): 467–99; Frank Mort, "The Commercial Domain: Advertising and the Cultural Management of Demand," in *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945–1964,* ed. Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters (London, 1999), 62–67. For the wider context see Stefan Schwarzkopf, "'They Do It with Mirrors': Advertising and British Cold War Consumer Politics," *Contemporary British History* 19 (June 2005): 133–50.

principle of the dividend; such people were likely to control the new television studios and could therefore use their power to shut out cooperators once again.[63] "Advertising haunts us everywhere," exclaimed another critic, who would have been even more dismayed by the tremendous increase in expenditure on advertising over the course of the decade—from £134 million in 1953 (1.6 percent of national income) to £323 million (2.2 percent) in 1959.[64] Business historian Charles Wilson has noted how systematically the new Unilever products, including soapless detergents, improved margarines, and frozen foods, were pushed on commercial television when it was eventually introduced. He observed that "the repeated slogans of the advertisers raised critical doubts in many sections of society."[65] This was the case not least among cooperators, such as George Darling and others, who insisted that the likely impact of commercial television on the movement had to be understood within a wider context of continuing economic and political conflict.

Conservative supporters of the white paper played on a number of what were, by then, well-worked themes. They claimed, contrary to Morrison's view, that the measure would be a blow against monopoly, and specifically against the BBC, which had patronized the British people for far too long. As an alternative, Conservatives claimed to be in favor of expanding the "freedom" of consumers, which they regarded as an essential hallmark of a modern democracy. "The critics do not trust British industry not to debauch their fellow human beings, and do not trust their fellow human beings with the freedom of a television knob," declared the Assistant Postmaster-General, L. D. Gammans, who introduced the discussion. "I hope that it will not go out as a result of this debate that this House and this generation are terrified of freedom."[66] Whereas Labour Party representatives, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and university vice-chancellors fretted about the adverse effects of commercial television on cultural standards and taste, Conservatives cleverly adopted a populist discourse that pitched the "masses" against the "classes."[67]

[63] *Parliamentary Debates,* 5th ser., vol. 522, 136–37.

[64] Ibid., 116; T. R. Nevett, *Advertising in Britain: A History* (London, 1982), 177. Interestingly, as much as 2 percent of national income had been spent on advertising in 1938. This suggests that the heat of this debate was due not simply to the fact that there was more advertising; it must also be explained in relation to the moral and political critique of advertising, which had strengthened during years of war and "austerity." See also Brian Henry, ed., *British Television Advertising: The First 30 Years* (London, 1986).

[65] Charles Wilson, *Unilever 1945–1965: Challenge and Response in the Post-War Industrial Revolution* (London, 1968), 101. In their contemporary account, Ralph Harris and Arthur Seldon noted, "the advertising of detergents has attracted more criticism than that of any other product, except, perhaps, more recently, cigarettes." *Advertising in Action* (London, n.d.), 148.

[66] *Parliamentary Debates,* 5th ser., vol. 522, 64–65.

[67] Ibid., 109.

Most important, Conservatives offered a spirited defense of advertising, arguing that an increasing standard of living and more advertising went hand in hand and that many ordinary people found advertisements both harmless and diverting.[68] Although both left and right often advocated a more "rational," "masculine" approach to buying at this time, recent work has underlined how political discourses of consumption were increasingly gender neutral in post-war Britain, in contrast to other contexts in which consumption practices were more obviously gendered.[69] Only one participant in the Commons debate—the Conservative MP Sir Ian Fraser—referred to specific kinds of consumers. Significantly, he chose to address those specific groups which, as we have seen, were often regarded as problematic constituencies by cooperative leaders. Defending the morality of advertising, Fraser remarked: "Every young married couple is concerned about what kind of furniture they can afford. . . . Every good-looking young woman likes to be told how she can preserve or, better still, increase her beauty."[70] The Home Secretary, David Maxwell Fyfe, also defended the industry and contested Darling's claims that advertising raised prices by pointing instead to the beneficial effects, from the standpoint of the consumer, of recent intensive advertising campaigns for cars and detergents.[71] Thus, Conservatives recognized that there was more to modern advertising than hoodwinking gullible consumers and understood that the industry was now developing far more subtle modes of representation and address.[72] Against moralistic critics of advertising, whom they portrayed as deeply condescending and elitist, Conservatives professed that they sought to empower the mass of consumers. Nevertheless, the outcome of this formative debate on the morality of consumer culture—which cut right across party lines—was a close-run thing: the White Paper on commercial television was only approved by a majority of twenty-two.[73]

[68] Ibid., 110, 145.

[69] Matthew Hilton, "The Female Consumer and the Politics of Consumption in Twentieth-Century Britain," *Historical Journal* 45 (2002): 103–28. From a large literature on the female consumer, see William Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores," *Journal of American History* 71 (1984): 319–42; de Grazia and Furlough, eds., *The Sex of Things*; Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven, Conn., 1998); Erica Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, N.J., 2000).

[70] *Parliamentary Debates,* 5th ser., vol. 522, 110.

[71] Ibid., 336.

[72] See Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose, "Mobilising the Consumer: Assembling the Subject of Consumption," *Theory, Culture and Society* 14 (1997): 1–36.

[73] As Hopkins underlined in *The New Look,* 405. Many Labour MPs and cooperators, for instance, shared the view that the BBC was elitist and sometimes accused the

The cooperative movement was also to be acutely disappointed by the Restrictive Trade Practices Act of 1956. Many cooperators had hoped that monopoly power would be checked by public ownership and legislative action in the immediate postwar years. They called especially for the abolition of resale price maintenance (RPM), which had been used to boycott the cooperative movement and to engross important markets since the early 1920s.[74] As we have seen, the radio and television boycott was greatly resented, but cooperators also faced numerous other boycotts from manufacturers who insisted on tight control over profit margins on a wide variety of commodities, including pharmaceuticals and medical goods, cosmetics, and rubber tires. During the long debate in the Commons in June 1950 on the report of the committee that investigated RPM for the Labour government, Co-operative MP W. T. Williams claimed that large numbers of trade associations were "refusing to supply co-operative societies with goods because they were afraid of the legitimate and constitutionally acceptable trading pattern of the co-operative movement." Percy Daines later singled out the Proprietary Articles Trade Association, which he accused of making it difficult for cooperative societies to give a dividend on a range of popular goods, including medicines, baby foods, and toiletries: "I deprecate the ganging-up of the producer, the wholesaler, and the retailer if the primary effect of the ganging-up is the exploitation of the consumer."[75]

The Act eventually introduced by the Conservatives that finally purported to regulate these practices contained an important loophole (Clause 20) giving individual manufacturers the right to fix conditions of sale and to enforce these conditions in the courts. In short, the Act made a difficult situation somewhat worse for cooperators, who tried vainly to amend the legislation. In a Commons debate on the clause, Co-operative MP A. E. Oram observed that this contest with capitalist manufacturers and traders stretched back over fifty years. He asserted that the Act would only serve to encourage capitalists who insisted that no dividend could be paid on their goods, thus effectively boycotting retail societies.[76] Indeed, as Helen Mercer has shown in her detailed study, the way in which the Conservatives framed the Act favored large-scale enterprise and represented "a charter for big business"; clearly, the Conservative claim that they represented the interests of the individual consumer against "monopoly" was little more than a useful political strategy.[77] The co-

organization of bias against the labor movement. See *Co-operative News,* September 17, 1955, 1–2.

[74] Fred Hayward, *The Co-operative Boycott* (Manchester, 1930); Gurney, *Co-operative Culture,* 229–30.

[75] *Co-operative News,* June 24, 1950, 7.

[76] Ibid., May 19, 1956, 2–3.

[77] Helen Mercer, *Constructing a Competitive Order: The Hidden History of British*

operative movement campaigned vigorously against Clause 20 and insisted on total repeal of retail price maintenance; the powerful London Society led the way here, distributing 750,000 leaflets and organizing special conferences on the issue before it even got onto the statute book.[78] The contest on the high street was also led by multiple retailers like Jack Cohen, founder of Tesco and ardent supporter of the Conservative Party, who presented himself as the authentic champion of the working-class housewife. Cohen offered instant gratification to shoppers in the form of lower prices, as opposed to the deferred gratification embodied by the co-op "divi," and ran a flamboyant campaign against RPM until its final collapse in 1964. Significantly, Labour leader Harold Wilson was to congratulate Cohen personally for keeping up the pressure.[79]

III. Hegemony of the Individual Consumer

Cooperators experienced the 1950s as a series of economic and political crises, then, and it was hardly surprising that the movement received short shrift from a political party that had traditionally regarded it with suspicion, if not outright hostility. In line with their general strategy, Conservatives attacked the cooperative movement, ironically, as yet another "monopoly," which, like the BBC and nationalized industries, constrained the "freedom" of individual consumers.[80] They hoped eventually to substitute an individualized, "discriminating" consumer for the loyal member of the local Co-op store: "The discriminating consumer is in fact the key figure in the competitive system."[81] And although there remains some doubt about the ability of the Conservative Party to mobilize working-class women voters after the war,[82] recent scholarship has firmly established the success of its appeal to the consumer.[83] Many in the party had deep misgivings about this shift, certainly, and, if anything, these were to

Anti-Trust Policy (Cambridge, 1995), 135. The movement was later sidelined by the Molony Committee on Consumer Protection, as Hilton observes in "Consumer Politics in Post-war Britain," in *The Politics of Consumption,* ed. Daunton and Hilton, 250–51.

[78] *Co-operative News,* June 16, 1956, 1.

[79] Corina, *Pile It High, Sell it Cheap,* 34. Wilson had promised action when president of the Board of Trade in 1950.

[80] *Parliamentary Debates,* 5th ser., vol. 522, 73.

[81] Conservative Research Department, "Report of the Policy Committee on Consumer Protection," June 1961, 1/3 para. 13, published soon after as *Choice: A Report on Consumer Protection* (London, 1961).

[82] See Amy Black and Stephen Brooke, "The Labour Party, Women, and the Problem of Gender, 1951–1966, "*Journal of British Studies* 36 (1997): 419–52.

[83] Notably by Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska in her meticulous study, *Austerity in Britain.*

become more apparent over time.[84] Ambiguities concerning a burgeoning consumer culture were initially exposed during the struggle over commercial television. In his memoirs, Lord Woolton, a modernizer who had made his money from retailing and who, as party chairman, is often credited as the chief architect of the Conservative victory in 1951, observed how deeply divided the country and his own party were on this issue and noted that the compromise eventually secured "might well have split the Conservative Party." At the annual advertising conference in 1954, Woolton contested the notion that the consumer was easily duped: "he quickly recognises what is good and what is false. But then I am democratic . . . and do not believe that it is necessary for Governments to exercise increasing controls over them."[85] In short, Woolton clearly understood that the identification between the Conservative Party and the affluent society was not merely contingent but also had to be actively constructed.[86] As we have seen, despite his support, younger backbenchers like John Rodgers, Charles Orr-Ewing, and John Profumo, who all had links of one kind or another with the worlds of advertising and telecommunications, only just managed to push commercial television through the Commons.[87]

Conservative economic policy was increasingly shaped by the priorities of the atomized consumer, especially after rationing was finally abolished in 1954. Most important, perhaps, the diffusion of commodities that most symbolized increasing affluence was made possible, to a large extent, by the relaxation of rental-purchase regulations. For their part, cooperators were wedded historically to a moral understanding of consumption that placed a premium on thrift and anathematized hedonistic, profligate spending. The roots of this attitude went back well into the nineteenth century, when debt and political dependence

[84] See Mark Jarvis, "The Conservative Party and the Adaptation to Modernity, 1957–1964" (PhD diss., University of London, 1999).

[85] Lord Woolton, *The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. The Earl of Woolton* (London, 1959), 392. The compromise agreement involved the establishment of an Independent Television Authority responsible to Parliament through the Paymaster General and a subscription from the state toward the initial cost of funding the authority. The first commercial broadcast was televised in September 1955.

[86] This was a view shared by the Conservative Research Department (CRD), which displayed an intellectual vitality lacking on the Labour side. See CRD2/21/6, Critique of "Can Labour Win?" by Anthony Crosland, 3–4; see also CRD2/44/6, "Some Notes for the PM," dated 30/4/58; John Ramsden, *The Making of Conservative Policy since 1929: The Conservative Research Department* (London, 1980).

[87] H. H. Wilson, *Pressure Group* (London, 1961), 80–82, 94–95. Note A. J. P. Taylor's tendentious review of this work in *New Statesman and Nation,* July 21, 1961, 85. More generally, see Burton Paulu, *British Broadcasting in Transition* (Minneapolis, 1961); Asa Briggs, *Sound and Vision: The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* (Oxford, 1979).

were regarded within radical culture as causally connected; as I have noted, postwar Labour governments found this perspective most useful. The explosion of goods that followed the end of rationing, coupled with the rapid expansion of credit trading, represented a real dilemma for cooperators. The movement had traditionally addressed its appeal to the better-paid, respectable stratum of workers who understood the importance of financial planning for both individual families and for the wider class.[88] From the mid-1950s especially, easy credit was available to a wider cross section of working people, who understandably soon made use of it. The editor of the *News* sounded this warning: "The relaxation of hire purchase regulations helped along the boom in credit trade, bringing bigger sales of TV and radio sets and furniture, and there is evidence that people with modest incomes are undertaking commitments that they may not be able to meet. . . . Societies would be well advised to keep a careful check on all their prospective hire purchase customers."[89] Such concerns were entirely understandable, as more and more working people, unable to pay mounting debt, were landing up in county courts at this time.[90] But despite fears about the morality of reckless spending, credit trade expanded rapidly within the movement, increasing from £2.6 million in 1946 to £18.8 million in 1958. This represented only a fraction of the total rental-purchase debt, which rose from £361 million in 1956, to £742 million in 1959.[91]

In short, organized consumers were squeezed both directly and indirectly by Conservative policy and ideology during this decade. They were to be treated little better by the Labour Party in its long period of opposition. Morrison in particular understood the importance of the cooperative alternative

[88] This issue is noted by Cole in *The British Co-operative Movement,* 54.

[89] *Co-operative News,* December 25, 1954, 2. See also March 5, 1955, 1–2, 4; August 6, 1955, 2. The high cost of credit for working-class consumers is discussed by Sue Bowden and Avner Offer in "Household Appliances and the Use of Time: The United States and Britain since the 1920s," *Economic History Review* 47 (1994): 742–43.

[90] The Prison Commissioners Report for 1959 noted that the number of prisoners received from county courts had risen from 1,116 in 1955 to 4,821 in 1959. They concluded that this increase was "largely as a result of failure to pay commercial debts of which the bulk will have been incurred as a result of hire purchase agreements." Cited in "Report of the Policy Committee on Consumer Protection," 4/7 para. 23. The study of debt throws considerable light on both the representation and practice of consumption, as Margot Finn shows in *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740–1914* (Cambridge, 2003).

[91] Bonner, *British Co-operation,* 248, 253. Rental-purchase regulations were relaxed in 1958. For the widespread existence of credit trading within the movement in an earlier period, despite official pronouncements to the contrary, see Paul Johnson, *Saving and Spending: The Working-Class Economy in Britain, 1870–1939* (Oxford, 1985), 131–39. Note also Peter Scott, "The Twilight World of Interwar British Hire Purchase," *Past and Present* 177 (2002): 195–225, who underlines widespread working-class reluctance to buy on credit before the war.

and tried to woo the movement, especially when Labour most needed the coop vote, but there was no real effort to shift policy in its direction.[92] The party did begin to take consumer issues more seriously, however, but was more inclined, as we have seen, to work around organized consumers rather than with them. Whereas the Co-operative Party was calling for a consumers' ministry that would serve to empower the wider movement by the mid-1950s, Labour backed the idea of a consumers' advisory service that, as Elaine Burton remarked in *The Battle of the Consumer,* would be "a permanent and reasonably ferocious watchdog of consumer interests."[93] This was not something, in other words, that Unilever, Proctor and Gamble, or J. Walter Thompson needed to be much concerned about. Admittedly, Burton and others also recommended some measure of state intervention to rectify certain market abuses, including the most duplicitous forms of advertising. An article in the *New Statesman* that canvassed the idea of a charter for consumers lent support to this idea. The author freely conceded that what Labour lacked was "an appealing alternative to the free market" and observed that historically the party had sought to protect and safeguard the interests of those groups in society (trade unionists and the poor, for example) most easily victimized or exploited. Now it was the turn of the consumer, and this provided an excellent opportunity to attack the party that now dominated political discourse: "When they talk of the 'sovereignty of the consumer,' what they really mean is the inalienable right of manufacturers and merchants to control the market. For 'free enterprise' is full of snares for the simple shopper, and not the least of them is the delusion that he is master of the market. In fact, capitalism is a vast conspiracy against the consumer." Misleading advertising, the persistence of resale price maintenance, and confusion produced by a dizzying array of goods now made action imperative. Although the writer grudgingly acknowledged the Co-operative Party's proposal for a new ministry, the potential role of the movement was completely overlooked. Paternalism characterized Labour's approach, and the party preferred to offer protection to the isolated consumer rather than collective empowerment.[94] When the 1946 agreement between the Labour Party and the Co-operative Union came to an end in 1957, reconciliation seemed further away than ever, prompting G. W. Rhodes to warn that "the Labour Movement

[92] See *Co-operative News,* June 4, 1949, 1; June 18, 1949, 1, 7–8; July 2, 1949, 5. Many cooperators regarded Morrison with suspicion and remembered his underhanded attempts to use the London Co-operative Society in the 1930s as "a milch cow to be milked on behalf of the London Labour Party." See Donoughue and Jones, *Herbert Morrison,* 211–12.

[93] *Co-operative News,* February 19, 1955, 1; Burton, *Battle of the Consumer,* 10. Not surprisingly, the Conservative Party also rejected calls for a Consumers' Ministry. See "Report of the Policy Committee on Consumer Protection," 5/6 para. 16.

[94] *New Statesman and Nation,* January 1, 1955, 3–4.

may well be heading for a disastrous split which will make the 1950–51 episodes appear mild in retrospect."[95]

As political historians have stressed, the Labour Party was racked by almost byzantine internal conflicts for most of the decade, and it would be misleading to point to any single dominant strand in its thinking.[96] Socialism had myriad meanings to Labour leaders like Attlee, Cripps, Morrison, and Bevan, but all shared a cautious, if not decidedly hostile, approach to the prospect of mass consumption. Generational factors were of some importance here; the ascetic "Labour Socialism" that marked a leadership formed in the interwar years was largely rejected by a younger generation of modernizers and revisionists.[97] As is widely recognized, it was the latter group that embraced affluence and the individual consumer most enthusiastically. Antagonists in the battle of the consumer often came literally to embody their respective positions; Anthony Crosland's flamboyant striped shirts and yellow ties contrasted vividly with Morrison's ill-fitting and shapeless co-op suits.[98] In his influential text *The Future of Socialism* (1956), Crosland firmly rejected Owenite utopianism and the cooperative ideal and famously welcomed the embourgeoisement of the working class, supposedly brought about by rising levels of consumption.[99] Further, Crosland contested the view that increased consumption had dubious moral or political results: "My working-class constituents," he later remarked, "want washing machines and refrigerators to relieve domestic drudgery; they want cars, and the freedom they give on weekends and holidays. . . . They want these things not (as Galbraith implies) because their minds have been brain-washed and their tastes contrived by advertising, but because the things are desirable in themselves."[100] As David Reisman has pointed out, Crosland

[95] *Co-operative News,* May 4, 1957, 3. The Labour Party tried unsuccessfully to get the movement to affiliate nationally to Labour in line with the Wilson Report and to abandon their political independence, a step that had only been taken by the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society. Divisions between cooperators and trade unionists were also opening up, the latter complaining of the number of cooperative candidates on Labour lists. See ibid., March 9, 1957, 1; February 16, 1957, 1–2; April 27, 1957, 1–2; Carbery, *Consumers in Politics,* 114–18; Rita Rhodes, *An Arsenal for Labour: The Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society and Politics, 1896–1996* (Manchester, 1998), 187–89.

[96] K. O. Morgan, *The People's Peace: British History, 1945–1990* (Oxford, 1990), 138. Note also Geoffrey Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought: A History* (London, 1985).

[97] Fielding, "Activists against 'Affluence,'" 247, 251.

[98] Kevin Jefferys, *Anthony Crosland* (London, 1999), 178. Morrison's notorious lack of sartorial care is remarked on by Donoughue and Jones in *Herbert Morrison,* 31, 57. The matter was rarely as clear-cut; Aneurin Bevan's taste for Saville Row suits is well known. Clearly, the relationship between politicians' private and public stance on consumption is worth further exploration.

[99] C. A. R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London, 1956), 112, 278–94.

[100] C. A. R. Crosland, *A Social-Democratic Britain* (London, 1971), reprinted in

hoped that the democratizing influence of mass consumerism would help integrate citizens into a "common consumer culture," as had already happened, he naively believed, in America.[101]

The growing hegemony of the individual model of the consumer was reinforced by the establishment of the Consumers' Association (CA) in 1957. Founded by an associate of Crosland, Michael Young, who had been advocating a consumer advice service since the beginning of the decade,[102] the group appealed most directly to members of the professional middle class who had internalized what the *Guardian* later referred to condescendingly as "the consumer creed, that narrow religion of graduate wives."[103] The association sought to educate consumers and help them negotiate their way through the world of modern consumer goods, mainly by means of their monthly publication, *Which?* magazine. As a number of commentators have pointed out, the consumer this organization addressed and constructed was quintessentially individual, rational, efficient, and male.[104] The CA also supported legislation to protect consumers, and Young even had the gall to suggest the need for a new Consumers' Party.[105] Despite the claims of the most recent historian of the CA, however, this was hardly a social movement in any recognizable sense of the term.[106] Thousands of middle-class consumers may have subscribed to *Which?* though it seems unlikely that many of these "members" had much idea about

---

Socialism Now (London, 1974), 79. Crosland was referring to J. K. Galbraith's popular work, *The Affluent Society* (London, 1958), which, together with Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (London, 1957), reinforced distaste for advertising on the left. In a coruscating essay, Raphael Samuel, for instance, argued that advertising and packaging were "as representative for 'bastard' capitalism as was coal and cotton for *laissez-faire,* or Empire-building for capitalism at the turn of the century." E. P. Thompson, ed., *Out of Apathy* (London, 1962), 49. Note also Raymond Williams, "Advertising the Magic System," *New Left Review* 4 (1960): 27–32.

[101] David Reisman, *Crosland's Future: Opportunity and Outcome* (London, 1997), 145; Catherine Ellis, "Total Abstinence and a Good Filing-System? Anthony Crosland and the Affluent Society," in *An Affluent Society? Britain's Post-War "Golden Age" Revisited,* ed. Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton (Aldershot, 2004), 69–84.

[102] Asa Briggs, *Michael Young: Social Entrepreneur* (London, 2001), 96.

[103] Cited in Sarah Franks, "Selling Consumer Protection: Competitive Strategies of the Consumers' Association, 1957–1990," (MPhil diss., University of Oxford, 2000), 63.

[104] Alan Aldridge, "The Construction of Rational Consumption in *Which?* Magazine: The More Blobs the Better," *Sociology* 28 (1994): 899–912; Bowlby, *Carried Away,* 6–7; Chris Beauchamp, "Getting *Your Money's Worth:* American Models for the Remaking of the Consumer Interest in Britain, 1930s–1960s," in *Critiques of Capital in Modern Britain and America: Transatlantic Exchanges, 1800 to the Present Day,* ed. Mark Bevir and Frank Trentmann (Basingstoke, 2002), 127–50; Hilton, "Female Consumer," 126.

[105] In his pamphlet, *The Chipped White Cups of Dover* (London, 1960). Note also Young's essay, "Anthony Crosland and Socialism," in *Crosland and New Labour,* ed. Dick Leonard (London, 1999), 49–53.

[106] Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth Century Britain,* 210, 212–14.

the wider aims of the organization.[107] It makes more sense, surely, to regard the CA as a pressure group that attempted to represent and amalgamate the interests of individual, rational consumers. The result was a politics of organized consumption of sorts, admittedly, but one that had as its goal the maximization of individual consumer satisfaction within a resolutely capitalist framework. Such a "politics" may have enabled people to make more well-informed choices about which refrigerator to purchase, or which package holiday represented the best value for their money, but it was not concerned with how purchasing decisions might collectively help bring about radical change in the social world.

Both the Labour and the Conservative Parties by this time agreed on the need for greater consumer protection.[108] More significantly, they had now internalized, to a greater or lesser degree, some of the central ways in which individuals were addressed, made sense of, and classified within the commercial domain, namely, advertising and market research.[109] Dismayed by this development, the editor of the *New Statesman* offered a pessimistic commentary on the eve of the 1959 General Election:

> Mr Gaitskell . . . sees the coming election as a contest in publicity techniques, in which Labour can beat mass persuasion by mass education. . . . It is all very well to run an auction on the marginal rates of employment, the relative merits of pension schemes, or plans for owning more cars, houses and washing machines. All these assume that our society is built on solid foundations—that the plateau of relative prosperity can be indefinitely maintained. . . . Someone has to tell the electorate the truth, to treat the voter as a citizen and not as a consumer. We shall soon face the problem of survival unless we remake our industry and our schools at a pace that at present seems unthinkable. This is a task that can best be accomplished by Socialist methods—and it is the real alternative to the ad-man's appeal to the ad-mass.[110]

[107] See Lawrence Black, "*Which?* craft in Post-war Britain: The Consumers' Association and the Politics of Affluence," *Albion* 36 (Spring 2004): 52–82.

[108] Hilton, "Consumer Politics," 255.

[109] See *New Statesman and Nation,* November 1, 1958, 1; June 11, 1960, 866; Black, *Political Culture of the Left,* 155–87; CRD 2/44/5, Home Affairs Committee Brief, "Advertising and TV"; CRD 2/44/6, "Reflections on the Use of TV in the General Election Campaign, 1959"; Mark Abrams, "Public Opinion Polls and Political Parties," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 27 (1963): 9–18; Richard Cockett, "The Party, Publicity, and the Media," in *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party since 1900,* ed. Anthony Seldon and Stuart Ball (Oxford, 1994); John Ramsden, *The Age of Churchill and Eden, 1940–1957* (London, 1995); Brian Girvan, "Affluence, Conservatism, and Political Competition in Britain and the United States, 1945–64," in *An Affluent Society?* ed. Black and Pemberton, 15–33.

[110] *New Statesman and Nation,* November 1, 1958, 1. The concept of "Admass," introduced by J. B. Priestly after a visit to the United States in 1954, represented a crude attempt by some left intellectuals to grasp the increasingly pervasive nature of

The Conservative Party spent nearly £0.5 million on what soon became known as the "TV election," and it employed a public relations firm to package its image. Labour MP Richard Crossman criticized the views of psephologist David Butler, who argued soon after Labour's defeat that the party should substitute public relations techniques for political education. This could only happen, Crossman maintained, if the party had "completely surrendered to Mr. Crosland's philosophy of Revisionism."[111] Labour's capitulation to a commercialized political discourse was hardly complete; powerful interest groups, including constituency party members, the trade unions, and the cooperative movement, continued to speak in a different idiom, but the shift at the center was surely significant. As Martin Francis has shown, at the level of subjectivity, political leaders also "loosened up" about affluence.[112] These changes tended to reinforce New Left arguments about increasing homogeneity within the political domain. "Is it any wonder that the whole movement of politics has become increasingly sluggish, shuttling between half-believed platitudes and contrasting 'images?'" asked Stuart Hall. He concluded: "It is because this stalemate has been lost sight of in the 'revolution in consumer goods,' that the thing is tolerable at all—that 'breakthrough' in the middle of 'this roaring decade' about which the *Economist,* Mr. Crosland, Mr. Gaitskell, and Mr. Macmillan all rejoice to concur."[113]

Within this context, the commercial difficulties that beset the cooperative movement gained a particular urgency. A correspondent to the *News,* for example, admitted that he bought only food from the store "because I don't like to wear, or see my wife wearing last year's fashions, and pretty poor copies at that."[114] The figure of the young "discriminating" consumer, who, it was believed, embraced the cultural politics of the New Look and had consequently

commercial discourse and practice. See Hopkins, *The New Look,* 231–32; Black, *Political Culture of the Left.* On constructions of the citizen-consumer in the United States, see Lizabeth Cohen, *Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, 2003).

[111] *New Statesman and Nation,* June 11, 1960, 866. Crossman was reviewing David Butler and Richard Rose's study, *The British General Election of 1959* (London, 1960). He continued to argue for public ownership in *Labour and the Affluent Society* (London, 1960).

[112] See Martin Francis, "The Labour Party: Modernisation and the Politics of Restraint," in *Moments of Modernity,* ed. Conekin et al., 168–70, and "Tears, Tantrums, and Bared Teeth: The Emotional Economy of Three Conservative Prime Ministers, 1951–1963," *Journal of British Studies* 41 (2002): 354–87.

[113] Thompson, ed., *Out of Apathy,* 70–71. A number of political scientists on the other side of the Atlantic voiced similar fears, including Otto Kircheimer, "The Waning of Opposition in Parliamentary Regimes," *Social Research* (1957): 127–56; H. H. Wilson, *Pressure Group,* 16–17, 211–13.

[114] *Co-operative News,* January 28, 1956, 13.

rejected the monochrome world of cooperation (color was a recurrent theme), was seen to lie at the root of the problem: "When they do get a house of their own, or an unfurnished flat, these young people are eager and 'choosey' buyers of those things which turn a house into a home."[115] And it was recognized that such consumers were increasingly dissatisfied with the movement, as a report of a WCG meeting underlined: "'My daughter says Co-op clothes are dowdy, she won't look at them,' complained one member with a teenage daughter, while another thought it might be our buyers who were at fault. 'They always seem to be a year behind with their fashions,' she said."[116] All this led some cooperators to argue for a more psychological approach to selling: "the man who sells must know a lot about the mind of his customer" and must remember that she is "a 'shopper' before she is a buyer. . . . Such a train of thought would have been foreign to retailers twenty years ago," wrote the editor of the *News.*[117] Thus, shopping and buying were rapidly becoming separated for the majority, and the working-class housewife could now realistically be portrayed not as a loyal member but rather as a flaneuse who had to be tempted into the stores.[118]

Finally, it would be misleading to portray the cooperative movement as simply a culture of resistance. What Jack Bailey called "the capitalist mode of thinking," which judged social movements solely in terms of narrow economic criteria and ignored the fact that cooperation was "an expression of significant social principle," was well represented at the leadership level.[119] This was understandable given the movement's contradictory attitude toward mass consumption and the growing belief that drastic action was required to improve trade across increasingly competitive markets. Even George Darling, for example, supported demands for greater "efficiency." He had also recommended the appointment of highly paid executives, with autonomy over management committees of retail societies, from the start of the 1950s.[120] The ideological crisis within the movement was discussed persistently in the press by the middle of this decade. A correspondent in the *News,* for example, criticized the paper for dropping its subtitle—"Journal of Associated Industry"—and suggested that it should now be dubbed "Capitalist Store Reflector." The conclu-

[115] Ibid., January 22, 1955, 10; February 12, 1955, 11.

[116] Ibid., May 18, 1957, 17.

[117] Ibid., September 3, 1955, 2.

[118] See Janet Wolff, "The Invisible 'Flâneuse': Women and the Literature of Modernity," in *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin,* ed. Andrew Benjamin (London, 1989), 141–56.

[119] *New Statesman and Nation,* May 28, 1949, 558. This criticism was also the burden of an excellent review of Crosland's *Future* by Alan Thompson, which appeared in the *Co-operative News,* November 17, 1956, 8.

[120] Ibid., September 23, 1950, 3.

sion was damning, if rather premature: "Only trade matters now, the movement is defeated."[121] The establishment of the Independent Commission of Inquiry by the Co-operative Union to investigate the trading crisis and formulate an alternative strategy is revealing here. Chaired by Gaitskell with Crosland as secretary, the commission was dominated by Labour revisionists and outside experts from universities and private industry. The final report, which appeared in 1958, recommended a sweeping amalgamation of retail societies and various other forms of rationalization designed to maximize economic "efficiency," including the appointment of university graduates on high salaries to run societies. Any utopian aspirations were brusquely dispensed with, particularly the claim that the cooperative movement sought to eliminate profit.[122] As Fred Abbotts later recalled, "It was a very good report—on how to run a capitalist business."[123] The commission's findings were hotly debated in cooperative circles, then duly ignored.[124]

IV. Conclusions

In 1963 journalist Robert Millar published an impressionistic study of changes in consumer behavior. Millar had little faith in the current majority, whom he regarded as gullible and irrational, prey to the seductions of advertisers—a mindless herd of sheep. He was, however, rather more optimistic about the future, at least for the right kind of consumer: "I want shoppers to be more critical, demanding and rational in their choice. . . . A more critical shopping public would improve standards of quality, encourage overseas buyers to buy British goods and help our balance of trade problem. And I should add that a nation that tolerates bad design, shoddy materials, and inferior workmanship is unlikely to demand high standards in its architecture, education, literature, politics, and ultimately, in its social relationships."[125] Maybe it was inevitable that Millar was to be disappointed, for he looked to the Consumers' Association to deliver this utopia.[126] If we put to one side the spurious scientism of product testing, there was little that was new in the association's ideology; social democrats in interwar Britain like Frank Pick had also hoped that in-

[121] Ibid., January 14, 1956, 5.

[122] *Co-operative Independent Commission Report* (Manchester, 1958), 19. Economic historian Sidney Pollard published an excellent critique of the report in *Socialist Commentary,* July 1958.

[123] Interview with the author, Manchester, April 1986.

[124] Crosland was acutely disappointed about this, as Jefferys points out in *Anthony Crosland,* 64–65.

[125] Robert Millar, *The Affluent Sheep* (London, 1963), 7.

[126] Ibid., 5–6. Millar lamented the fact that the CA was a predominantly middle-class body.

dividual consumers, schooled in good design by bodies such as the Council for Art and Industry, might bring about the Earthly Paradise. This view was as politically unrealistic in the early 1960s as it had been thirty years before.[127]

Like many other commentators before and since, Millar chose to ignore the only real location of consumer power—that is, the cooperative movement. This alternative nevertheless remained an important part of the collective organization of everyday life for millions of people, a vital social underpinning for any potential socialism, even after it had been effectively marginalized by the state.[128] Cooperative practice demonstrated that people's purchasing decisions could be harnessed effectively to create a more humane and democratic economic and social order. Many members stubbornly continued to put loyalty to their own stores and factories before their discrimination as consumers, well into the 1960s and beyond, much to the consternation of their opponents.[129] More generally, the movement contested the increasingly common reduction of the idea of freedom to individual consumer choice and the reconstitution of the political domain according to the logic of supply and demand.[130] Admittedly, we need to know far more about the movement's internal difficulties, which undoubtedly contributed to its eventual decline: conflictual labor relations within cooperative enterprises; the failure to recruit a new generation of young (particularly female) workers, as well as members of other social groups; and the inability to confront properly an often rather ascetic approach to the world of goods. The structural economic and political constraints outlined above, however, probably outweighed these internal factors in the final analysis. Regardless of the precise explanation for the decline of the cooperative movement, which is today struggling to survive in a highly competitive retail market, it is now regarded by the majority as just another large business. As George Hulme explained: "I think what started me thinking about this was when I went to my local Co-op here [in Rochdale] and they started issuing a little book—they don't even do that any more—you got little coupons that you stuck in. It was a fraction of a penny in the pound and there was no point in saving them really. . . . I mean the young people don't know it is a Co-op, they don't know, they think it's a supermarket owned by Mr Co-op. . . . Our local Co-op doesn't even have 'Co-op' on, it's the 'Late Shop,' that's all it has

[127] See Michael T. Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar-England: Medieval Modernism and the London Underground* (Oxford, 1999), 28–29, 138–40.

[128] Geoff Eley, "Socialism by Any Other Name? Illusions and Renewal in the History of the Western European Left," *New Left Review* 227 (1998): 108–9.

[129] See, for example, my opening quotation.

[130] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Oxford, 1991), 171–72. Such changes have led critical sociologists like Zygmunt Bauman to describe "postmodern" existence as being "like a life-long confinement to the shopping mall." See his *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London, 1992), vii.

on, the word Co-op's not even mentioned, you wouldn't know. . . . It's just become a huge capitalist enterprise now."[131]

For the cooperative movement to have achieved its aim of substituting the welfare of organized consumers for the profit motive on a widening front in postwar Britain, a number of major political transformations would have been vital. First, the economic power of monopolies and trade associations would have had to be restrained effectively by the state. Second, the Labour Party would have needed to rethink the policy of nationalization and would have had to embrace cooperative forms of common ownership and democratic control. Last, the integration of organized consumers into the social democratic state apparatus by means of a specific consumers' ministry would have been required. Had all these conditions been met, a different outcome might have been possible in the battle of the consumer: a society in which the alternative vision of cooperation found more than an exiguous place. But the movement was to be repeatedly disappointed, as we have seen, for even those in the Labour Party who were most sympathetic to the organized consumer, like Herbert Morrison, were firmly wedded to a model of political economy in which state and producer interests were invariably given the highest priority. The potential of the Labour Party to radically restructure British society in the second half of the twentieth century was thus seriously undermined by its inability to properly integrate the interests of organized producers with those of consumers.[132]

The full effect of the marginalization of the organized consumer has yet to be properly assessed, but it is tempting to suggest that the unmaking of one of the "three pillars of socialism," as consumer cooperation was sometimes called both in Britain and abroad, helped prepare the ground for the triumphalist resurgence of neoliberal capitalism in Britain since the end of the short twentieth century. Though detailed research remains to be done, it seems likely that the pattern was repeated across Europe after World War II, though with significant differences. The League of Co-operatives grew tremendously in northern Italy, for example, but suffered greatly after the leadership was taken over by Communists in 1947.[133] Cooperators in Belgium managed to gain a foothold within the state as part of the Central Economic Council charged with

[131] Interview with the author, Rochdale, March 1994.

[132] Some leading left intellectuals in Britain had emphasized the importance of reconciling the producer and consumer for decades. See G. D. H. Cole, *The World of Labour* (London, 1919), xxiii; and *A Century of Co-operation* (Manchester, 1945), 394–98; R. H. Tawney, *The Acquisitive Society* (1921; Brighton, 1982), 123.

[133] Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy,* 201–2. The left critique of cooperatives in Italy is discussed by G. Sapelli, "La cooperazione come impresa: Mercati economici e mercato politico," in *Il movimento cooperativo in Italia,* ed. G. Bonfanti et al. (Torino, 1981), 268–71.

national planning in 1948, yet this did little to check the calamitous decline of what had once been a most ambitious movement. In West Germany, the state positively impeded cooperative expansion by legally limiting dividends to 3 percent, while in Austria, faced with increased pressure from capitalist retailers, "co-operators adapted themselves to the free-market economy, they rationalized and competed."[134] The organized consumer fared somewhat better in the Nordic countries, particularly Sweden, where a moralized view of consumption, which had underpinned the social democratic state since the early 1930s, continued to hold ground until relatively recently.[135]

From one angle, although it is fashionable at the moment to gesture toward the creative capacities of consumers,[136] the containment of the moral economy of cooperation lends support to an earlier, rather more pessimistic analysis of a society in which men and women "make common cause with the world against themselves, and the most alienated condition of all, the omnipresence of commodities, their own conversion into appendages of machinery, is for them a mirage of closeness."[137] While there is something still to be said for Adorno's bleak view of mass consumerism, a more fruitful perspective is opened up by the work of anthropologists like Mary Douglas, who has contested moralistic denunciations of consumer behavior and calls for the simple life. Instead she has persuasively argued that we need to understand how people use goods to communicate and to make sense of the world and their place in it.[138] Many British working-class people may have desired commodities and embraced the cultural style of the New Look as part of a revalorization of the self,[139] for example, rather than as a way of rejecting in toto their class backgrounds and identities.[140] They may, in other words, have been using goods to

[134] Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda, eds., *Consumers against Capitalism? Consumer Cooperation in Europe, North America, and Japan, 1840–1990* (Maryland, 1999), 86, 212, 295. The majority German movement finally collapsed amid financial scandal in the 1980s.

[135] Ibid., 260–62; Andrew Shonfield, *Modern Capitalism: The Changing Balance of Public and Private Power* (Oxford, 1965), 205.

[136] See, inter alia, Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 1996); Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar-England,* 29; Hilton, "Fable of the Sheep," 260–61.

[137] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (1951; London, 1974), 146–47.

[138] Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (London, 1978); Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), 3–63; Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity,* 224.

[139] See Carolyn Steedman's suggestive essay, "State-Sponsored Autobiography," in *Moments of Modernity,* ed. Conekin et al., 41–54.

[140] Determinism marked the early literature. See Mark Abrams, *The Teenage Consumer* (London, 1959); Mark Abrams and Richard Rose, *Must Labour Lose?* (London,

explore different ways of being working class.[141] Some of the local and national leadership of the cooperative movement, like many Labour leaders, unfortunately often failed to grasp this process fully at the time and too often resorted to condemnation of recalcitrant and increasingly "disloyal" or "discriminating" shoppers. Again, we should not overestimate the damaging effects of Puritanism; the cooperative project was undermined more extensively by changes in the structure of developed capitalism and the general political neglect of the organized consumer.

Finally, as Douglas has also stressed, greater sensitivity as to why people might desire goods should not invalidate political and moral critique. Goods, she observes, are arranged in "vistas and hierarchies" that are neither fixed nor randomly arranged; rather, they undergird structures "anchored to human social purposes . . . [which] may well deserve all the criticism and moralising that is generally given simply to the consumer's choice of goods."[142] Indeed, as Douglas insists: "There is no serious consumption theory possible that avoids some responsibility for social criticism. Ultimately, consumption is about power."[143] The developments traced in this article—the hegemony of an individualistic model of the consumer within the political as well as the economic domain, and the consignment of a collective, moral alternative to the social and political margins—constitute a real and continuing loss.

1960); Ferdynand Zweig, *The Worker in an Affluent Society* (London, 1961). John Goldthorpe and David Lockwood soon undermined this crude view, first with their article, "Affluence and the British Class Structure," *Sociological Review* 11 (1963), then later in J. Goldthorpe, F. Bechhofer, J. Lockwood, and J. Platt, *The Affluent Worker: Political Attitudes and Behaviour* (Cambridge, 1968), and *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Cambridge, 1969). There is an insightful discussion of "affluent worker" studies in James E. Cronin, *Labour and Society in Britain, 1918–1979* (London, 1984), 169–72. Note also Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism,* 252, who reminds us that the concept of the embourgeoisement of the working class was not new and can be traced back to the socialist revisionism of Eduard Bernstein in the late nineteenth century.

[141] Tiratsoo, "Popular Politics, Affluence, and the Labour Party in the 1950s," 55–56.

[142] Mary Douglas, "Why Do People Want Goods?" in *Understanding Enterprise Culture,* ed. Shaun Hargreaves Heap and Angus Ross (Edinburgh, 1992), 25.

[143] Ibid., 30.